

Sūrah 105

Al-Fil (The Elephant)

(Makkan Period)

Title

The *Sūrah*'s title is derived from the opening verse which speaks of the people of the elephants.

Period of Revelation

The consensus view is that this is a Makkan *Sūrah*. While keeping in mind its circumstantial setting, it does appear to be an early Makkan *Sūrah*.

Circumstantial Setting

In the explanatory note n. 4 on *Sūrah al-Burūj* we stated that the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia had attacked Yemen and put an end to the Himayrite Empire in retaliation for the massacre of the Christians of Najrān in Yemen carried out by the Jewish ruler of Yemen, Dhū Nuwās. By 525, the Abyssinians had established their full control over the entire region. This had been possible, thanks to the assistance provided by the Roman Empire to the

Abyssinians; the latter did not have a naval fleet. With the help of the naval fleet provided by the former, the latter had been able to penetrate deep into Yemen, with its 70,000-strong army. Let us clarify that no religious factor was behind this collaboration. Rather, political and economic factors accounted for the alliance; avenging the blood of Christian victims was merely a pretext. After having captured Egypt and Syria, the Roman Empire sought to remove the Arabs from the trade scene in order to monopolize its trade with east Africa, India, Indonesia and other territories already under Roman rule. In pursuance of the same objective in 24 or 25 BC, Augustus had sent a huge army to the western coast of Arabia, led by Aelius Gallus. Its goal was to capture the sea route from northern Arabia to Syria. The climatic rigours of Arabia, however, proved unbearable for the army and the expedition was aborted. At a later date, the Romans moved their naval fleet to the Red Sea which blocked the Arabs' sea trade. They were left with only the land route to carry out their trade. So as to capture this land route too, the Romans entered into an alliance with the Abyssinians and helped them establish control over Yemen, while also providing them with a naval fleet.

Arab historians have recorded divergent accounts about the Abyssinian army that invaded Yemen. According to Ibn Kathīr, it was led by two chiefs – Aryāt and Abrahah. Muḥammad ibn Ishāq speaks of Aryāt as its leader with Abrahah a member of the army. Both of these historians report a fierce confrontation between Aryāt and Abrahah, which resulted in the killing of the former. Consequently Abrahah captured Yemen and persuaded the Abyssinian king to appoint him his governor of Yemen. As opposed to this version, Greek and Syriac chroniclers inform us that after the conquest of Yemen, as the Abyssinians started killing the local chiefs who had put up resistance, one of these chiefs, Esymphaeus, pledged both his allegiance and payment of the poll tax and so secured governorship of Yemen. However, the Abyssinians rose in revolt against him and appointed Abrahah as governor in his place. Esymphaeus was a slave of a Greek trader who had, by dint of his shrewdness, gained the confidence of the Abyssinian army. The armies sent by the Abyssinian king to dethrone him were defeated or he caused division in their ranks. Eventually, the king

recognized him as his deputy there. Greek historians name him as Abrames and the Syriac ones as Abraham. Abraha is possibly its Abyssinian version.

Gradually, he turned into a sovereign king, though nominally he acknowledged the authority of the Abyssinian king. He referred to himself as vicegerent. However, he was an influential and mighty ruler. When he celebrated his renovation of the Mārib Dam in 543, envoys of the Roman and Persian Empires and of the kingdoms of Hirā' and Ghassān joined him in the festivities. Its detailed account features in the plaque inserted by him at the dam. This plaque has survived to this day and is reproduced by Glaser. (For details see *Saba'* 34: n. 37.)

After having established his rule firmly over Yemen, Abraha turned his attention to the original plan which he shared with the Roman Empire. His aim was two-pronged: (i) to promote Christianity in Arabia, and (ii) to capture the trade carried out by the Arabs between the eastern territories and the Roman border. This plan had assumed some urgency on account of the confrontation between the Persian and Roman Empires, as a result of which the Romans could not expand trade in any other direction.

For achieving this objective, Abraha had a towering church built in Ṣan'ā', capital of Yemen, called by Arab historians as al-Qulays, the Arabic version of the original Greek, Ekklesia. In the words of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, after its construction he informed the Abyssinian king that it was his resolve to divert the Arabs' devotion to the Ka'bah to the new church.¹ Ibn Kathīr states that he publicly announced the same in Yemen and issued a proclamation to that effect. So doing, he intended to provoke the Arabs into taking action, that would provide him with the pretext he needed to invade Makkah and demolish the Ka'bah. Muḥammad ibn Ishāq reports that an Arab felt so outraged at this proclamation that he somehow entered the church and defecated inside it. Ibn Kathīr ascribes this act to a member of the Quraysh. Muqātil ibn

1. After gaining their control over Yemen, the Christians consistently strove to set up a shrine that would replace the Ka'bah in being the central shrine in the whole region. Accordingly, they erected a shrine in Najrān, of which the details appear in our explanatory note 4 on *Sūrah al-Burūj*.

Sulaymān's version is that some Quraysh youth set this church on fire. In view of Abrahah's provocative proclamation, any of the above incidents was to be expected. It is not at all surprising that in the *Jāhilīyah* period some Quraysh youths may have burnt down the church or that some Arab may have defecated inside it. It is also likely that Abrahah may have planted someone to damage the church thereby legitimizing his invasion of Makkah. By destroying the Quraysh, and thus placing all the Arabs under his awe, he could easily achieve both of his objectives. Whatever be the case, when Abrahah received the report about the desecration of the church at the hands of some devotee of the Ka'bah, he vowed to demolish the same.

In 570 or 571, Abrahah proceeded towards Makkah leading a 60,000-strong army, which had 9 or 13 elephants as part of its force. On the way, he was first confronted by a Yemeni chief, Dhū Tafr. He however, was quickly defeated and arrested. In the Khath'am region, Abrahah's army was challenged by an Arab tribal chief, Nufayl ibn Ḥabīb. He too, could not match Abrahah's strong and resourceful army and was also arrested. To save his own life, though he agreed to act as a guide for Abrahah's army. When Abrahah reached near Tā'if, the Banū Thaqīf realized that they were no match to the invaders. Apprehending the desecration of the temple and of their idol, Lāt, their delegation called on Abrahah and offered to guide his army, if he spared their temple. Abrahah accepted this offer and the Banū Thaqīf's representative, Abū Righāl, joined the army as the local guide. At some distance from Makkah, at a place called al-Mughammas or al-Mughammis, Abū Righāl died. For a considerable time thereafter Arabs used to stone his grave, thereby expressing their disapproval of his betrayal. They also taunted the Banū Thaqīf, for their collusion with the invaders of the Ka'bah in order to protect their own shrine to Lāt.

Muhammad ibn Ishāq relates that the advance contingent of Abrahah's army took away the cattle belonging to the people of Tihāmah and of the Quraysh, including 200 camels of 'Abd al-Muṭtalib, the Prophet's grandfather. Abrahah deputed his envoy to the Makkans, telling them that he did not intend to fight them. His only objective was to demolish the Ka'bah. He promised them amnesty, if they did not resist him. He had directed his envoy to

bring along with him the Makkan chief, if he was interested in negotiation. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib was the then Makkan chief. The envoy conveyed to him Abrahah's message. He replied: "We do not have the strength to engage Abrahah. This is the House of God. If He wants, He will save and defend it." The envoy asked him to call on Abrahah, to which he agreed. Abrahah was struck by his towering personality and stepped down from his throne in order to receive him. He asked 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib if he could do anything for him. In response, the latter asked him to return his 200 camels captured earlier by his army. Abrahah replied: "I was impressed by your personality. But your reply has lowered my estimation of you. You ask for the return of your camels while you say nothing about the Ka'bah, which has been for long your forefathers' shrine." 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib retorted: "I am the owner of only my camels and request you about the same. As for the Ka'bah, it is the House of God, Who will protect it Himself." Abrahah replied that his Lord would not be able to so defend it from him. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib then said that this was a matter between him and the Lord. He then left Abrahah, who returned to him his camels.

Ibn 'Abbās's version is, however, different. It makes no reference to the demand to return the camels. According to 'Abd ibn Humayd, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Marduwayh, Ḥākim, Abū Nu'aym and Bayhaqī, who all cited reports on this incident on Ibn 'Abbās's authority, when Abrahah reached al-Ṣifāh, (a place between the mountains of 'Arafāt and Tā'if that is situated near the boundary of Haram), 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib called on him. Abrahah asked him if he needed anything and regretted that he had to come all this way to him. He also plainly told him that he was there to demolish the sanctuary. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib replied: "It is the House of God. So far, He has not let anyone establish his authority over it." Abrahah, however, reiterated his resolve to demolish it. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib offered him anything he wanted on condition that he left Makkah without damaging the Ka'bah. Abrahah refused and ordered his army to advance.

Without preferring one version to the other, it emerges clearly from both that the Makkans, including the tribes in the adjoining areas, did not have the means to take on Abrahah's huge army in their bid to save the Ka'bah. They did not, therefore, put up any

resistance. Even at a later date, the Quraysh could muster only a 12,000-strong army on the eve of the Battle of the Confederates when they had joined hands with other polytheists and Jews in order to attack Madīnah. Clearly, then, they lacked the strength to confront a 60,000-strong army.

Muhammad ibn Ishāq relates that after returning from Abrahah's camp, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib directed the Quraysh to move to the mountains along with their families in order to escape being massacred. Then he entered the Ka'bah along with some other Quraysh leaders and while holding the handle to the door of the Ka'bah, he supplicated to God, invoking His help to protect the Ka'bah and its custodians. 360 idols then littered there. However, they abandoned these idols and sought only God's help and protection. Their supplications, as cited in the reports of the day, contain invocations to only the One True God. Ibn Hishām quoted the following couplets then recited by 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib:

O God! Man defends his house. So, You defend Your House.
Let their Cross and strategies not overwhelm Your strategy tomorrow.

If You leave us and them at our own, You are free to act as You like.

In his *Rawd al-Unf*, Suhaylī quoted this couplet as well:

Rescue Your children today against the children and devotees of the Cross.

Ibn Jābir, in turn, recorded these couplets as being recited by 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib:

O my Lord! I do not expect anyone to confront them, except You. O my Lord! Protect Your House against them. The enemy of this House is Your enemy. Stop them from destroying Your town.

After making supplications, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib and his men retired to the mountains. The next day Abrahah proceeded to enter

Makkah. However, his special elephant, Maḥmūd, which he was riding refused to move on. Though all attempts were made to coax him, it did not move an inch. Whenever it was directed to move in any direction other than that of Makkah, it moved at speed yet it sat down when it was turned towards Makkah. In the meantime, there suddenly appeared swarms of birds carrying stones in their beaks and claws, which they pelted upon the Abyssinian army. Anyone who was hit by these stones quickly started to rot, the flesh falling away from his bones. In the opinion of Muḥammad ibn Ishāq and Ḥikrīmah it struck the army like smallpox. Such an epidemic was so reported for the first time in Arabia. Ibn ‘Abbās describes that one hit by such stones developed an itch which led to the bursting of their skin and their flesh falling away. The other report by Ibn ‘Abbās relates that the flesh and blood of those hit by these stones melted, baring the bones. Abrahah met the same fate. His body disintegrated, with his flesh falling away from its skeletal frame. These pieces of flesh rotted in no time. Panic struck the army and they retreated towards Yemen and sought the help of their local guide, Nufayl ibn Ḥabīb. However, he flatly refused, saying:

Where is the escape route for you while God is after you? Abrahah (the split nose) lies subdued. He is not the conqueror.

In the ensuing stampede many died. ‘Aṭā’ ibn Yaṣār clarifies that all the members of the army did not die then and there. Some collapsed on the spot while others died as they fell on the way. Abrahah too, breathed his last on reaching the town of Khath’ām.²

The above calamity struck the Abyssinians at Muḥassir, a place that lies between Muzdalifah and Minā, near the Muḥaṣṣab Valley. Imām Ja’far Ṣādiq’s account of the Prophet’s Farewell Pilgrimage,

2. In addition to this punishment, Allah put an end to Abyssinian rule over Yemen. Works on history state that the calamity befalling Abrahah in Makkah struck a severe blow to them. Many Yemeni tribal chiefs rose in revolt. Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, a tribal chief, managed to secure military help from the Persian emperor. Only a one thousand strong Persian army that arrived on six ships sufficed to overthrow the Abyssinians in 575.

which he related on the authority of his father, Imām Muḥammad Bāqir and Jābir ibn ‘Abd Allāh, and which is cited by Muslim and Abū Dāwūd, is as follows: “As the Prophet (peace be upon him) moved from Muzdalifah to Minā, he accelerated his pace while crossing the Muḥassir Valley.” Imām Nawawī explains that the calamity that befell the people of the elephant also occurred at the same point. It is part of *Sunnah* to cross this valley at a fast pace. In his *Muwatṭa'*, Imām Mālik reports that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The entire Muzdalifah is fit for staying in. However, the Muḥassir Valley is not fit.” The following couplets by Nufayl ibn Ḥabīb, cited by Ibn Ishāq throw further light on this:

O Rudaynah, had you seen it but you will not see what we saw in the Muhaṣṣab Valley. I thanked God on observing the birds, though I apprehended lest the stones might strike us. All of them were looking for Nufayl, as though I owed some debt to these Abyssinians.

This historic incident soon gained fame across Arabia. Many poets composed odes in order to commemorate it. All these odes attribute it to God’s supreme power; no idol worshipped inside the Ka’bah at that time is even implicitly credited with the rescue. Take these couplets by ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zibārā as illustrative:

Those sixty thousand could not return to their homes.
Even those who fled, including their chief, Abrahah did not survive. ‘Ād and Jurhum flourished there prior to the appearance of the Abyssinians. God oversees His servants and maintains this place.

Abū Qays ibn Aṣlat exclaims:

Rise and worship your Lord and anoint the corners of the House of God located between the mountains of Makkah and Minā.

The One on the Throne rescued you and the hosts of that King repulsed them in a way that some lay on the ground while others were stoned to death.

According to Umm Hāni' and Zubayr ibn al-'Awwām, the Prophet (peace be upon him) remarked: "For seven or ten years after this incident the Quraysh worshipped exclusively the One True God." Umm Hāni's report is cited by Imām Bukhārī, Ṭabarānī, Hākim, Ibn Marduwayh and Bayhaqī while Ibn Zubayr's is recorded by Ṭabarānī, Ibn Marduwayh and Ibn 'Asākir. The above version is endorsed by Sa'īd ibn al-Musayyib's *mursal* report featuring in Khaṭīb Baghdādī's work on history.

The year in which this incident happened is called by the Arabs the Year of the Elephant. In the same year the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was born. *Hadīth* scholars and historians unanimously date this incident to the month of Muḥarram, and the Prophet (peace be upon him) was born some fifty days after this incident.

Theme

In the light of this historical account, as one studies *Sūrah al-Fil*, one readily recognizes why this cites so briefly the divine punishment meted out only to the people of the elephant. For this incident was then common knowledge among the Arabs. They realized that the Ka'bah had been defended by Allah, not by some of their pagan gods or goddesses. The Quraysh chiefs had invoked only Allah for help. They felt so indebted to Him that for some years they worshipped no one other than Him. Hence, there was no need to reiterate these points in the *Sūrah*. Only a brief reference to the incident sufficed to draw the attention of the Quraysh in particular, and of the Arabs, in general, to the Prophet's call. It consisted only of urging them to worship the One True God while abandoning all other gods. Another lesson embedded in this incident for them was that if they try to suppress the Prophet's call, Allah, Who had routed the people of the elephant, may afflict them with His punishment as well.